ARTICLE SEP 21, 2019

The Geopolitics of a Political Scandal

Why Trump and Giuliani's Pressuring of Ukraine Is Terrible for Ukraine and U.S. Foreign Policy

This series of events is incredibly worrisome in the context of the health of U.S. democracy.

AUTHORS

James Lamond Max Bergmann

Restoring Social Trust in Democracy, Foreign Policy, Trump Administration

Night view of the south facade of The White House, September 2018. (Getty/DEA/M. Borchi)

Find more about Trump's Constitutional Crisis as it develops here.

For months, a scandal of immense proportion has been bubbling below the surface, involving Rudy Giuliani and President Donald Trump trying to pressure Ukraine into opening investigations involving American citizens. In the era when there are new scandals on a weekly basis, this fairly intricate and convoluted plan had largely stayed below the surface of most political conversations in Washington. However, with the recent revelation that this plot may be at the center of the whistleblower complaint that the Trump administration is withholding from Congress, the scandal has boiled over.

This series of events is incredibly worrisome in the context of the health of U.S. democracy. But there are also serious geopolitical implications: This scandal is terrible for both the United States and Ukraine's interest.

For several months, there have been reports about Rudy Giuliani—the president's personal lawyer and former mayor of New York City—urging prosecutors in Ukraine to open two sham investigations. The first is into whether Ukrainian officials took steps in 2016 to work against Trump's presidential campaign. The second is into Hunter Biden and whether or not he used family connections in the Obama administration to leverage diplomatic efforts toward Ukraine to benefit a Ukrainian gas company on whose board he sat. Both of these conspiracy theories are completely specious but appear to be part of an effort to improve Trump's political standing.

Recently, however, we've learned that President Trump repeatedly pressured the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, to investigate Biden, urging him eight times to work with Rudy Giuliani in one phone call on July 25, 2019, according to

The Wall Street Journal. It is looking more and more likely that President Trump sought to use U.S. security assistance as leverage in order to coerce Zelensky into complying. Prior to that call, Trump's White House made a decision in July to block $250 million in security assistance to Ukraine. This may be at the heart of the whistleblower scandal that has rocked Washington over the past week.

This also comes at an incredibly delicate time for Ukraine's democratic progress. Zelensky was elected president in May 2019 on a promise of sweeping anti-corruption reforms. Corruption has been endemic in Ukraine for decades and has led to stagnant economic growth and frustrations among the Ukrainian people. In fact, there have been two popular revolutions within 10 years of each other—the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution—in which uprooting corruption was core to protestors' demands. Petro Poroshenko, the first president elected following the Euromaidan revolution, struggled to implement meaningful changes. It was largely this failure to turn the corner on major anti-corruption reforms that led to his loss in the 2019 election to Zelensky, a political novice and former actor who ran as an outsider promising to uproot the broken system. Support for Zelensky's agenda is strong, and only two months after winning the presidency, his party—Servant of the People—won a resounding victory in the parliamentary elections.

While it is still early and there is much work to still be done, Zelensky has been making some very promising steps and demonstrated a real commitment to reforms. Under Zelensky, a new anti-corruption court has been put into place, and around 74 anti-corruption bills have already been submitted to the new Ukrainian parliament. Zelensky also removed the former Ukrainian prosecutor general Yuriy Lutsenko—who was widely criticized by human rights organizations—and replaced him with Ruslan Riaboshapka, who had previously quit his high-level position at the National Agency for Preventing Corruption allegedly over concerns about the agency's management.

Entrenched corruption, however, is not the only issue that the new government is dealing with, as Ukraine has been at war with Russia since 2014. While the two sides are technically in a ceasefire, and the conflict is stalled at the line of contact that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe monitors, the war has cost 13,000 lives. In addition, there are near-daily ceasefire violations, and as of August 30, 2019, 72 Ukrainian soldiers have died this year in the fight, according to the *Kyiv Post*. Here, too, Zelensky has made some important initial progress toward improving relations. Earlier this month, Ukraine and Russia, in the most important sign of movement toward peace in years, exchanged dozens of prisoners, including political prisoners held in Russia and 24 sailors that were detained last year in waters near Crimea that have been at the heart of recently heightened tensions. These are small steps, and Putin has shown little—if any—signs that he will be willing to step away from his support for the breakaway regions. But this is important, and delicate, progress.

Donald Trump and Rudy Giuliani's efforts to coerce the new government to start investigations that are corrupt in their intent undermine these hard-won gains. It is harmful for the Ukrainian people's desire for justice and peace as well as U.S. interests in the region.

By trying to coerce Zelensky and his government into this blatantly corrupt scandal and push the country backward, Trump and Giuliani are undermining years of important diplomatic efforts by the United States and its European allies. It undermines the Zelensky government's efforts to genuinely break with the past and build a future with Europe and the West.

The Ukrainian people have voted into office a new government committed to change. At this moment, the United States should be supporting this new government, pulling them closer to the rule of law, and supporting transparent governing. Instead, the president is actively doing the opposite.

James Lamond is a senior policy adviser at the Center for American Progress. Max Bergmann is a senior fellow at the Center.